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*William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of
Modernity* by Krister Dylan Knapp (review)

Benjamin D. Crace

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and Afro-Caribbean influences, Spiritualism and Theosophy, the occult sciences, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, and more. Part Three, “Post-American Reincarnation,” concentrates on the experiential dimensions of contemporary reincarnation theories in chapters dealing with altered states, past-life narratives, paranormal sciences, regression therapy, and near-death experiences.

In the final chapter of this tour-de-force of scholarship—The Metaspectral Highway—Irwin speculates on the larger significance of the material he has so aptly analyzed. He contends that what we see in these theories is the active part played by the imagination rather than traditional doctrines or texts. He makes the convincing case that the role of the imagination in creating reality has been underappreciated and understudied: “If belief creates heaven and hell, then other beliefs or theories may create alternate afterworlds or processes whose discovery and actualization requires a more expansive model of human enhanced capacities” (390). In Irwin’s analysis beliefs do matter; they shape an individual’s worldview and activities every bit as much as economic, political, and social factors.

In a short review it is impossible to do justice to the breadth of intriguing material discussed by Irwin and the conclusions he draws about modern religious sensibilities. The major thing that can and must be said is that the book is a major scholarly achievement and one more very big nail in the coffin of the theory that modernity is synonymous with secularism and disenchantment. Irwin’s book will appeal to all readers interested in the way humans have answered the great existential questions about the purpose and meaning of human life and the pain and suffering that accompanies it.

Allison P. Coudert, University of California–Davis

William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity. By Krister Dylan Knapp. University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 400 pages. \$39.95 cloth; ebook available.

With an historian’s critical eye and abundant use of primary sources, Knapp weaves a complex and compelling thesis that reconsiders the role James’ psychical research played in his personal, social, and intellectual development. Knapp offers an account of James that centralizes his psychical research as the forge for his method that extended to his thought on fideism, pragmatism, and psychology. This method “designed to navigate the epistemological uncertainty of the modern age” (18)—what Knapp calls James’ *tertium quid*—provides a theoretical anchor that holds the book together.

Part One of *William James* establishes the *tertium quid* thesis, explores James' journey towards the psychical, his initial research in the field, and some of his early, resultant theories. Psychical refers to "phenomena . . . at the borderland of regular consciousness" or what James termed "consciousness beyond the margin" (1). Research into this area included Spiritualism and telepathy and was carried out by organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), a group that played a key role in James' research. Knapp writes: "James turned to psychical research to rethink, not reject, the well-trodden approaches to two classic dualisms—the natural versus the supernatural and the normal versus the paranormal . . ." (6). Knapp then establishes James' lifelong interest in the "non-normal," as encouraged by a coterie of thinkers that surrounded his family life and the intellectual freedom he experienced growing up.

After detailed (and sometimes boring) accounts of the Sidgwick Group, the SPR, and the American branch of the SPR, Knapp takes a closer look at James as a psychical researcher. Much of this section revolves around his philosophical development, involvement in debunking various fraudulent mediums, his attendance at séances, and extensive concentration on his "one white crow," Lenora Piper, a mental medium whom he believed held "dramatic possibilities" for psychical research. Part Three connects the historical and contextual with the constellation of James' emergent theories about the nature of consciousness and the afterlife. He concludes that James' "sublime reservoir theory of immortality became the final instance of his *tertium quid* intellectual disposition" (185). The conclusion wrestles with competing narratives in Jamesian studies and adds a critique of following the *tertium quid method ad absurdum*, especially in the face of scientific falsification.

Overall, Knapp has a novelist's attention to detail. However, this assiduity sometimes weighs in on arguments in Jamesian minutiae that the reader may find uninteresting. At these points, the author is so busy at filling in the gaps in the literature that he forgets to fill in the gaps for the reader. Ironically, and at times maddeningly, the endnotes only have the barest of bibliographic information when what one really wants is insightful commentary. Nonetheless, the nicely reproduced photographs of the major players help anchor the historical and abstract into the personal and concrete.

Religious studies scholars will find much to appropriate and appreciate in *William James*. It provides an excellent snapshot of an important time through the lens of a major thinker. Such a historical treatise still has contemporary purchase as more and more new religious movements emerge from conditions similar to the nineteenth century. James' *tertium quid*, so well-articulated by Knapp, is a helpful disposition in a discipline struggling against reductionistic Positivism and religious

exclusivism. *William James* would make an excellent supplemental text for an upper division undergraduate/graduate religious studies or psychology of religion course.

Benjamin D. Crace, American University of Kuwait

Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art. By Arthur Versluis. State University of New York, 2017. 172 pages. \$80.00 cloth; \$20.95 paper; ebook available.

Arthur Versluis' latest book seeks to reinstate the critical importance of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought within multiple fields of academic study: literature, painting and fine art, philosophy, religious studies and, importantly, consciousness studies. In pursuit of this central agenda, Versluis provides the reader with an interesting overview of the current state of academia in regard to these fields.

The recurring theme is that the academy at large has completely disregarded the role of intuition, mysticism, or anything esoteric, in favor of discursive reasoning alone. "The greatest taboo among serious intellectuals is the heresy of challenging a materialist worldview" (80).

From my own experience, I would conclude that Versluis is completely spot on here. Furthermore, he is correct in stating that an insider/emic and outsider/etic approach to many of these fields is essential in order to have any hope of understanding the topics in question. Unfortunately, we are only allowed a dispassionate, cold, outside analysis in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. So, what is the solution?

Versluis' answer seems to have two steps. First, bring Plato back into the academy (he did found it after all!) and into professional societies where he has always belonged. Second, highlight the fact that many Platonic mystical notions were nearly identical to some now verified claims coming out of current consciousness studies and neuroscience. According to Versluis, consciousness studies and subfields in religious studies, like neurotheology, seem to validate a portion of the wisdom of the perennial philosophy and mysticism.

It appears that many of Versluis' points about the ascent of consciousness are apt, but only for mysticism, as opposed to esoteric religion, which feels like a much broader category that includes magic and occultism. Nevertheless, Versluis seems to equate esoteric religion with mystical awareness and not much else. "The ascent of consciousness is what makes esoteric religion esoteric, if it is not present then what you are looking at is not esoteric religion" (83). Perhaps this is true for Jewish and Christian mysticism, Sufism, Indian Tantrism and even internal alchemy. After all, Versluis does say, "the metaphysics of